

The Role of Discourse Analysis in Language Teaching

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Abstract: In this article, a special attention is paid to the main feature of the discourse in language teaching as well as creating suitable contexts for interaction, illustrating exchanges and providing learners with opportunities to process language within a variety of situations are all necessary for developing learning environments.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, Schallert, discourse features, ideology, communicative approach.

The communicative approach to language teaching, which began in the early 1970 and gradually took over most of language teaching in the world, at least in “ideology” if not in practice, has made people aware of the need to focus on communicative features of language use as an integral part of the teaching program. It is widely accepted in the field that we teach both “language *for* communication” and “language *as* communication.” In other words, the objective of language teaching is for the learners to be able to communicate by using the target language, even if at times this is limited communication, and the most effective way to teach language is by *using* it for communication. So, given this premise, the *goal* of language teaching is to enable the learner to communicate and the *method* for teaching is for the learner to experience and practice relevant instances of communication.

Discourse analysis and pragmatics are relevant to language teaching and language learning since they represent two related discourse worlds that characterize human communication. The first represents *intended meaning* transmitted within context and is, therefore, concerned with sequential relationships in production; and the other explains the *interpreted meaning* resulting from linguistic processing and social interaction, all the while taking into account a variety of contextual factors, at the receptive end. Language teaching needs to focus on both strategies of message construction to facilitate learner production of the communicative intent and strategies of interpretation, in order to ensure some ability on the learner’s part to process inferentially (even if only approximately) the speaker/writer’s intent.

For many years during the first half of the twentieth century and well into the second half, language teaching, like linguistics, used the *sentence* as its basic unit of analysis. In language teaching this meant that rules, examples, exercises, and activities focused on individual sentences. Learners need to focus, therefore, on various discourse features within any specified language activity.

The discourse perspective in language teaching places particular importance on the notion of shared knowledge. This notion relates to one’s general knowledge of the world – knowledge to which participants in an interaction can appeal before, during, and after a communicative event. This appeal to or reliance on knowledge of the world is not always conscious, but it always affects the communicative interaction by either easing it along or interfering and even blocking it. The extent to which the participants share such knowledge will, therefore, affect the degree to which the communicative interaction will be effective.

In the literature about reading and writing the term prior knowledge plays a very central role. It is the conceptual knowledge that enables interact to communicate with one another via the

written or spoken text. Marr and Gormley define prior knowledge as “knowledge about events, persons, and the like which provides a conceptual framework for interacting with the world.” Schallert[1982] further expands the notion to refer to *everything* a person knows, including tacit and explicit knowledge of procedures and typical ways of expressing information. Alexander et al. Develop a conceptual framework of knowledge including domain and discipline knowledge as part of general content knowledge, and knowledge of text structure, syntax and rhetoric as part of one’s discourse knowledge.

Effective communicative interaction among language users is achieved, therefore, when there is a basic sharing of prior content and discourse knowledge between the producers and the interpreters of the text. There needs to be a matching of three types of background knowledge: prior factual or cultural knowledge; prior work or life experience; and prior familiarity with the relevant discourse community. For spoken language the interlocutors need to be familiar with sociocultural conventions and interaction management. Considerations of politeness norms, of turn-taking conventions, and of forms of address are important for maintaining social harmony and for personal negotiation. For written language, writers and readers need to share writing conventions, familiarity with genre types, and rhetorical traditions.

These abilities seem to be quite transferable if the language classroom provides sufficient opportunities for using such strategies in the second language. As a result of the general acceptance of the communicative approach, language learning and language teaching have had to fully incorporate communicative interaction into the curriculum. The fact that language users exhibit linguistic, cultural and social identities in a real-life interaction affects the teacher’s choice of simulated or specially designed classroom interactions which attempt to recreate the main features of the real-world event within the language classroom. The competent language teacher can no longer limit herself or himself to being an educator and a grammarian. To a certain extent, she or he also has to be a sociolinguist, aware of and interested in various aspects of discourse analysis.

Fortunately, there are several books now available to address this educational need. Cook introduces the theory of discourse analysis and demonstrates its practical relevance to language learning and teaching for those with little background. In the first part, which deals with theory, the author provides accessible definitions for basic concepts in discourse analysis. In the second half, he demonstrates the incorporation of discourse analysis into language teaching. [1] Nunan[1993] also directs his work at beginning students in discourse analysis, and, like Cook, he addresses language teachers who want to incorporate discourse analysis into their teaching. The main purpose of the book is to give the reader “some of the key concepts in the field and to provide [the reader] with an opportunity of exploring these concepts in use” [1993: ix]. Nunan’s choice of texts helps clarify and deepen the reader’s understanding of discourse analysis. The three other texts described below present more extensive theoretical grounding for applying discourse analysis to language teaching. McCarthy [1991] goes into the details of how discourse analysis relates to the different language areas (grammar, vocabulary, phonology) and to spoken and written language. The main objective of the book is to help language teachers become knowledgeable about discourse analysis. The book encourages teachers and material developers to use natural spoken and written discourse in their textbooks, teaching materials, and classroom activities. Hatch [1992] aims to give teachers and other practitioners in the field of language teaching a better understanding of how the general theory of communication, and discourse analysis in particular, can and should relate to language teaching. She includes discussion of scripts, speech acts, and rhetorical analysis, among other areas. Perhaps the most comprehensive text available is McCarthy and Carter [1994], which presents the relevance of a basic description of the properties of discourse analysis to language teaching. The book describes research and findings in the area of discourse analysis and shows how these findings can be applied to classroom teaching. It is rich in authentic texts, which provide data for analysis and exemplification.

All in all, the biggest obstacle with regard to moving beyond approaches to communicative language teaching, and arriving at a communicative approach that is fully informed by discourse analysis at both the theoretical and practical levels, is to provide language teachers and other teaching professionals (curriculum developers, language testers) with proper grounding in discourse analysis. Many language teaching professionals receive training in grammar, phonetics, and the teaching of the language skills such as reading, writing, and speaking. A few programs also include a theoretical course in discourse analysis, but such a course generally does not make practical connections with the language classroom. Courses in “pedagogical discourse analysis” are still the exception in teacher training programs, despite the fact that a body of appropriate pedagogical material exists. The need for professional training in pedagogical discourse analysis is clear not only for second and foreign language teachers but also for first language educators and literacy specialists. Until training catches up with need, appropriate reading materials, in-service training, and professional conferences are some of the ways to fill the gap.

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